An American Girl's Story of Her Oriental Romance

Continued From Preceding Page.

the other's heritage and formulas; but she said nothing to make me self-conscious, not even repeating the remarks of her acquaintances until long afterward.

However, I heard comments from other sources, which irritated me a trifle and had the perfectly natural effect of stimulating my loyalty to Chan-King and arousing at times a yearning tenderness to shield him from injustice. At this time we tentatively expressed our views on intermarriage. We were sitting on the porch late one afternoon. "I believe marriage between alien races is a mistake," I said, in the decisive way I cultivated at that time. "It is better to marry one's own kind."

"No doubt there are fewer difficulties," he answered without conviction. "It is all so much a personal problem. Marriages between Americans do not seem to be always successful."

I flared. "We hear only of the unhappy ones," I retorted.

"But there are many, many unhappy ones, then," he returned gently. "I wonder if unhappy marriages in all countries is not due to selfishness and lack of love and to unwillingness to compromise on unimportant differences."

We could not possibly quarrel here, and our talk proceeded amiably. My thoughts at dinner that night seem very amusing to me as I recall them now. Chan-King was so like one of us, as we sat at table together, that I found myself wondering if it was true that a Chinese wife did not eat at the same table with her husband; if she actually did wait upon him and obey him without question in everything; if Chan-King would return to China soon and there become an insufferable, autocratic Eastern husband. The thought oppressed me unbearably. Since Chan-King was leaving next day on a summer vacation trip this was a farewell dinner. He insisted on helping me with the dishes afterward, for ours was a simple household, and we usually had no maid. We were very merry over the task. "In China," he confided, as he stacked the saucers, "the lot of women is much easier. They have servants for everything of this kind. I know an English woman who married a Chinese, and she afterward taught in a college for the sake of something to do."

"She did quite right," I said. "Idleness is not good for any one."

"Chinese wives are not idle," he answered, gravely; "they have many duties for every one in their household."

At this he turned his eyes upon me, with an intent, inner look. Because I was impressed, I chose to be flippant.

"If I obstruct your view, I will move," I said.

"It would do no good," he answered. "You are always there—wherever I want to look."

Later he was writing his name in Chinese characters on a photograph he had given my mother. I stood beside him. He dropped the pen, turned to me and took both my hands in his own. He bent toward me, and I drew away, shaking my head decisively. I wrenched one hand free, and the kiss he meant for my lips reached my fingers instead. I was overwhelmed with a sense of invasion. We quarreled, but without bitterness or real anger. I was simply convinced that, since love was not for us, we were bound by all ethics to keep our relations in the outward seeming of friendship. For a moment I felt that one of my ideals had been rudely shattered.

"Oh, but you have mistaken me!" he declared, earnestly, refusing to release my hand.

"Kisses are not for friendship," I managed to say.

"I'm sorry," he confessed, but I saw in his eyes that he regretted my misunderstanding of him, nothing more.

During his summer travels he wrote me many letters. I had time to think, and in my thoughts I admitted that to be a friend to Chan-King was better than to have the love of any one else in the world.

When he returned, we wandered together one evening down to the campus and sat on a stone bench in the moon shade of a tall tree. I had overheard a remark, tinged with race prejudice, that had awakened again in my heart that brooding maternal tenderness, and when Chan-King's eyes pleaded wistfully, I gave him, as a sacrificial offering, the kiss before denied.

That fall he transferred for a year to a New England university. He told me long afterward it was so that absence might teach me to know my own heart. I loved him now and admitted it to myself with bitter honesty. But all fulfilment of love seemed so hopeless and remote, the chasm fixed between our races seemed so impassable, that I gave up in my heart and put away his letters as they came, smiling with affected youthful cynicism at the memory of that kiss, which could mean nothing more to us than a sweet and troubled recollection.

He came back unexpectedly at the end of the college term. There was an indescribably hopeful, anxious look in his eyes as he took my hands. My first sight of his face, grown older and graver in those long months, brought a shock of poignant happiness, very near to tears. Off guard, we met as lovers, with all antagonisms momentarily swept away, all pretenses forgotten. I went to his arms as my one sure haven. For this hour love made everything simple and happy.

My father and mother were astonished when we told them of our intention to marry. With gentle wisdom, mother suggested that we allow ourselves a year of engagement, "in order to be sure," as she expressed it. We were very sure, but we consented.

Chan-King wrote at once to his people in south China, telling of his engagement. For me, he had one important explanation, made in his frank, straightforward way. "In China," he told me, "it is usual for parents to arrange their children's marriages often years in advance. When I was very young, it was generally understood that I would later marry the daughter of my father's good friend, three years younger than I. There was no formal betrothal, and, when I left home to study, I asked my father not to make any definite plans for my marriage until my return. The subject has never been mentioned since, and I don't know what his ideas are now. But they can make no difference with us—you understand that, Margaret, dear?" Again I felt myself in spiritual collision with unknown forces, and wondered at his calmness in opposing the claims of his heredity.

We all gathered about the library table, where he spread a flaming array of embroidered silks, carved ivory and sandalwood and curious little images in bronze and blackwood.

His family replied to his letter with a cablegram, forbidding the marriage. I had never seriously expected any other decision. A letter followed, conciliatory in tone, in which his father explained that since Chan-King's foreign education was nearly completed, arrangements had been made for his marriage to Miss Li-Ying immediately upon his return home. He gave a charming description of his bride, whom Chan-King had not seen for twelve years. She was, he said, young and modest and kind, she was beautiful and wealthy, and moreover had been given a modern education in order to fit her for the position of wife to an advanced Chinese. The match was greatly desired by both families. In conclusion, the letter urgently requested that Chan-King would not make it impossible for his father to fulfil the contract he had entered into with a friend, and very gently intimated that by so doing he would forfeit all right to further consideration.

There were other letters. An American friend, a missionary, wrote—oh, very tactfully—of the difficulties he would have in keeping an American wife happy in the Orient. A Chinese cousin discussed at length the sorrows a foreign daughter-in-law would bring into his house—the bitterness of having in the family an alien and stubborn woman, who would be unwilling to give his parents the honor due them or to render them the service they would expect of their son's wife.

Many letters of this kind came in a group. There was a hopeless tone of finality, a solid, clan consciousness in those letters that frightened me a little. I was uneasy, uncertain. I had found no irreconcilable elements in our minds, for I was very conservative West and he was very liberal East. But here were represented the people with whom his life must be spent and the social background against which it must harmoniously unfold. I felt with terrific force that it was not Chan-King, but Chan-King's traditions and ancestors, his tremulous racial past, that I must reckon with.

Also I did not wish to stand in the way of his future. I doubt if I could have found courage to marry Chan-King if I had then realized the importance—especially in diplomatic and political circles—of clan and family influence in China. But he gave it up so freely, with such assured and unregrettable cheerfulness, that I could not but share his mood.

In these calm, logical, impersonal family letters, which Chan-King translated for me, there was a strain of sinister philosophy that chilled me as I read. The letters dealt entirely with his duty in its many phases—to his parents, to his ancestors, to his country, to his own future. Nothing of love! Only one relative, a cousin, mentioned it at all, and in this wise: "You are young now, and to youth love seems of great importance. But as age replaces youth you will find that love runs away like water.

"That is not true, Chan-King," I said, with solemn conviction. "Love is greater than life or age; it lives beyond death. It is love that makes eternity!"

At this time Chan-King did not quite comprehend my mystical interpretation of love. But he answered very happily, "To have you for my wife is worth everything else the world can offer."

"But surely your mother will not give you up!" I exclaimed one day when it dawned on me that not one message had she sent in all the correspondence.

"Not in her dear heart," he said, with unshaken faith, "but of course she will not write to me if my father disapproves."

"But a mother, Chan-King!" I protested. "Surely her feelings come first always!"

Chan-King's tone was patient after the manner of one who has explained an obvious fact many times. "In China," he reminded me again, "the family comes always before the individual. But with you and me, Margaret beloved, love has first importance."

His never failing insistence upon viewing ours as an individual instance, not to be judged by any ordinary standards, was a source of great strength to me always. During the short period that followed before our marriage we tiffed a few times in the most conventional manner, with fits of jealousy that had no foundation; small distrusts that on my part were merely efforts to uphold what I considered my proper feminine pride, and on his were often failures to discount this characteristic temper of mine. Only, somehow, there was never any rancor in our quarrels. Not once would we deny our love for each other.

So we planned to be married immediately. There were no reasons why we should delay further. That is to say, none but practical reasons, and what have they to do with young people in love? "It is a little late for us to begin practical thinking," said Chan-King cheerfully, when we discussed ways and means. "But we might as well make the experiment."

Chan-King was no longer merely a student with a generous allowance from a wealthy father. On his own resources, with his education not completed, he was about to acquire a foreign wife and to face an untried world. We were strangely light hearted about all this. Chan-King had regularly put by more than half of his allowance since coming to America. I meant to be a teacher of languages, economically independent if circumstances required such aid for a man beginning a career. Our plans were soon completed. At the end of another term, which we would finish together, Chan-King would be graduated, and then, after a year of practice in his profession, he would return to China, there to begin his life work. I was to follow later. Nothing could have been more delightfully simple so far as we could see. A few days later we were married in my mother's house by an Anglican clergyman. "Of course you will live here with us until you go to China," my parents had said. "We want our children with us if you can be happy here."

This seemed a very natural arrangement to Chan-King, accustomed as he was to family life. But I was apprehensive. The popular Western idea that people cannot be friends if they are related by law was heavy on my mind. I did not expect any drastic readjustment of temperament between my Chinese husband and me, but I did look forward somewhat timorously to a trying period of small complications due to differences in domestic customs and the routine of daily living.

I need not have worried a moment; a wonderful spirit of family cooperation was an important part of Chan-King's Oriental heritage. From the day of our wedding he took his place with charming ease and naturalness as a member of the household. The affection that existed between my husband and my parents simplified that phase of our relation perfectly and left us free to adjust ourselves to each other and the world, though the latter we took very little into account. Until I met Chan-King the idea of being conspicuous was unendurable to me. But when I early perceived that to appear with him anywhere was to invite the gaze of the curious I discovered with surprise that it mattered not at all. I was very proud of my husband and loved to go about with him. We were happy from the beginning.

Discovering life together proved a splendid adventure, which renewed itself daily.

(*Continued Next Sunday.*)

Europe's Curious Shop Signs

In many streets of continental Europe are still to be seen signs, or unwritten words, which have no such clear significance as the hat before a hatter's shop or the boot before a cobbler's. Certain of these signs are so obscure in origin and meaning that no one could understand them without reference to tradition or the passersby.

Everybody in this country knows that a pole painted with spirals of red, white and blue is the usual sign before a barber's shop. But how few know that the stripes are supposed by some persons to represent leeches? That was when barbers performed simple surgical operations and leeches were much employed to take blood from patients. Strange as it may seem, in those days bleeding was the great "cure all."

Before many barber shops in Europe small brass plates are hung. These are oval, concave and curiously scooped out on one side as if a piece had been bitten out of it. This represents the old fashioned cupping dish, which barber chirurgeons, or surgeons, also used in taking blood from patients.

Who would naturally suppose that mats of straw, loosely plaited and fastened to the corners of buildings signify that oysters are there for sale? But this is their meaning. In Europe oysters are never eaten except raw, and in mild weather they are exposed on the sidewalk beside a man ready to open them for customers. In bad weather, when the oysters are not exposed, persons who can read may find them mentioned among the names of fish on the shop's placards, but the mats are then expected to inform the illiterate on the point.

The old proverb, "Good wine needs no bush," refers to the custom of putting a bush before a wine shop door as a sign. Sometimes a branch is placed above the door instead. Often no name or any other sign is displayed by the wine seller.

Such a bush may be of any tree common to the locality. In the north it is often spruce or pine or a huge branch of mistletoe. In the south it is almost always olive or myrtle, and generally renewed on fete days. The bushes have acquired the name "bouchons" in France, and this is applied to small taverns also.

The ancient usage of hanging a bush over the door is obsolete in cities, but was doubtless the origin of the habit of placing small evergreens in portable wooden boxes outside cafes and restaurants in Paris and other large communities.

A common sight in Paris is that of horses led through the streets with bunches of straw tied to their tails. This signifies that these animals are for sale. In fact, a bunch of straw tied to any object can always be interpreted to mean that the present owner is ready to enter into negotiations with any one who takes a fancy to his property. Thus, as he passes along the streets one sees baby carriages, bicycles or any second hand furniture with the bunch of straw attached. He who runs may read such a sign even better than a written or printed card.

It serves another end as well, for advertisements can be taxed, while there is no tax on a bunch of straw. In France, unless an owner has a regular license to sell, he must place a Government stamp on any sign or writing hung at the door. In the same way even a dressmaker or shoemaker in want of apprentices must put a Government stamp on any notice so displayed.

A curious instance of this use of straw used to be seen near English law courts of the eighteenth century. Men willing to bail criminals or debtors were seen parading with straws in their shoes, thus signifying that they would bail for pay. Thus worthless bail came to be called "straw bail."

The bunch of straw in continental Europe has as many meanings as a Chinese word. It is quite a little language in itself. When seen in the midst of a field tied to a post far from human habitation it is a warning against trespass. The peasant knows that he will be arrested or punished if found within the boundaries of a field so marked, for the field has been lately sown with seed. Woe to the sportsman or traveler who fails to understand this sign language.

One sees certain pennants looking a trifle like flags when the wind has died out hanging beside certain city shops. These, which are always a bright red in color, hang from small iron frames, and nothing else indicates that those within are dyers, who work in many colors besides red.

A small upright sign scarcely ever more than two feet long and much like a miniature torpedo boat standing on end is not a cigar, as the first glance would cause one to suppose. To be sure it hangs outside a cigar shop and resembles a bad imitation of a cigar, but is in truth shaped and tied about like the original packages of tobacco brought to the country.

These packages, called "civettes," were of a given size, were large in the middle and tapering toward the ends. Such signs originated when many of those who had learned to smoke had not learned to read. Now they are lettered all over and ornamented with figures of crossed pipes or cards. For in Europe cards are always sold at tobacco shops.

Red lights, which shine from afar at night show to all smokers here they can replenish their stock. But the unwary stranger may bring up some night in the police station, for the red light is not only a sign of the tobacconist but of the watch house as well.

Over all grocers' shops was once placed a cone like sign made in imitation of a sugar loaf and its blue paper wrapping. These signs were of tin. An American learned in an interesting way they were hollow and light, instead of wooden and heavy, as he had always imagined them to be.

Some years ago, in going down the Rue St. Honoré, near the Rue Royale in Paris, he was on top of an omnibus. It was after the terrible days of the Commune and the fighting had been fierce in this quarter. As he passed along, high in the air, he saw one of these sugar-loaf signs pierced through from one side to the other. A bullet had gone in at one side and out at the other, leaving a ragged hole in the tin.

Long after most of the effects of those direful days had passed away this battle-scarred sign still hung over that grocer's door. The front of the building had been pieced, repainted or renovated, but still the tin sugar loaf sign remained.

At last the grocer retired from business—as is the way with small French tradesmen when they have amassed a little competency—and a newer and younger man took his place, who considered that his shop was better without than with this reminiscence of brothers fighting against brothers. So the last sugar-loaf sign disappeared from this central, fashionable part of the French capital.